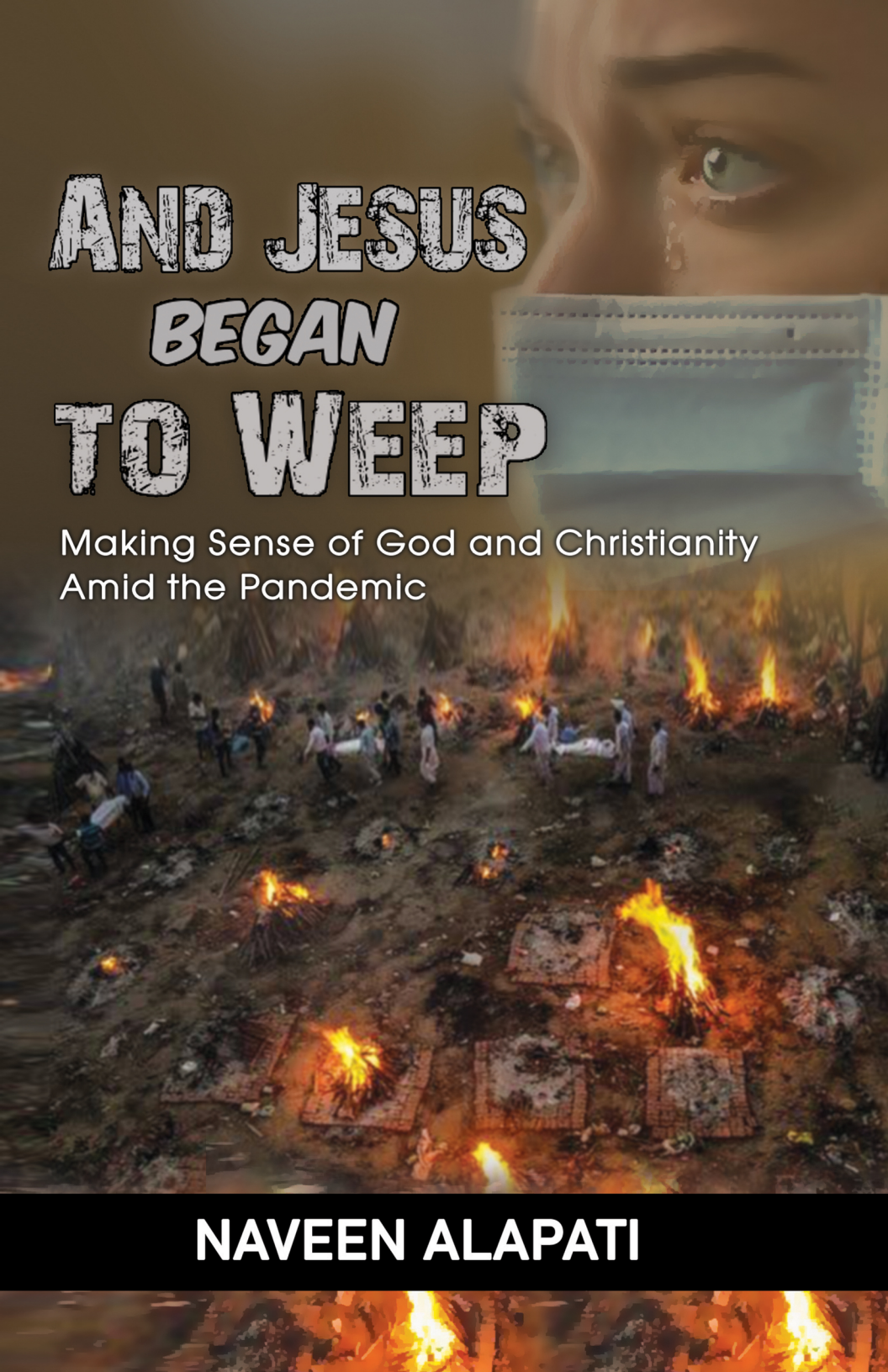
AND JESUS
BEGAN
TO WEEP
Making Sense of God and Christianity
Amid the Pandemic
NAVEEN ALAPATI

With the sudden uprise of the second wave of the COVID-19 in many parts of the world, things are getting worse than before. People are in a state of helplessness and hopelessness. The situation unmasks how failed are our self-built systems and how humankind is insecurely protected. The land has become insufficient to bury or cremate the deceased ones. Many are feeling it hard to breathe. The hopes are shattered and every single report has become a nightmare. The joy of many hearts has ceased; our dancing has been turned to mourning. This situation raises many insignificantly significant theological questions like, is this the wrath of God? Where is God right now? How can we make sense of God and the Christian faith amid this serious crisis? This book is an attempt to address those questions and to make sense of Christian faith and responsibility in the world.

This densely packed book grapples with different theological questions as it places us with Job in the dust and takes us along with Christ on the road to Golgotha and from thereon to behold the new creation with the slain lamb of God. Engaging the readers to make sense of their pain during the ravaging pandemic, the book effectively weaves a theology of suffering and weeping God, whose ultimate vision for humanity is not destruction and terror but a new creation and a transformed world.

- **Pr. Philip P. Sam,** *M.Th (Old Testament), (Ph.D)*

"What oxygen is for the lungs, such is hope for the meaning of human life" said Swiss Theologian H. Emil Brunner.

This book by Naveen Alapati is a must read, if you, like others, have wondered or voiced concern about the precense or silence of God in today's VUCA world.

To the humanity that struggles to survive on a depleting supply of hope, I pray that readers of this book will emerge as heralds of hope. May our conversations instill the peaceof Christ in every desperate , hopeless and questioning heart!

- **Mrs. Starla Luke,** ***Vice President, India Bible College and Seminary***

Naveen Alapati is a theological student in the India Bible College and Seminary, Kerala. He is the author of the book *Unmuting the Bible: Recovering the Depopularized Vision of God* (2021).

And Jesus Began to Weep

Making Sense of God and Christianity amid the Pandemic

Naveen Alapati

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And Jesus Began to Weep: Making Sense of God and Christianity amid the Pandemic

by Naveen Alapati, 2021

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To the Mourners
Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh!

And to the Frontline Workers
In the Lord, your labour is not in vain!

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Foreword

When encountered with suffering, the human being tries to reason in order to comprehend its nature and motives. Some theological trends within the Judeo-Christian religious worldview led its followers to perceive suffering through the lens of divine punishment or retribution. Such an approach, however, impedes us from hearing various other voices of suffering within the revelation of the Sacred Scriptures. The reflections presented in this book enable us to hear this rich variety of voices and representations of the understanding of suffering within the Christian Scriptures, which is made doubly significant in the present context of suffering due to the corona virus disease (COVID 19) throughout the world.

In this book *And Jesus Began to Weep: Making Sense of God amid the Pandemic*, Naveen Alapati offers us a second touch of the Spirit of God, which may enable us to sail through the difficult realities of suffering towards fulfilling the mission of God. The book starts with an invitation "*to sit*" with the biblical character Job, to understand the purposes of God in and through suffering. Then the author guides the readers "*to walk*" with Jesus to the peak of Golgotha, to see the inevitability of suffering in bringing God's justice to a fallen world. Further, the writer draws readers towards a deeper acknowledgement of human helplessness - "*to weep*" with the sufferers – in order to begin understanding, however hazily, the ultimate reality of suffering. Finally, the book urges the readers to prepare themselves for "*journeying with the Lamb to the New Creation*."

This book will help many who are going through suffering, as well as many who are seeking a right religious perspective of suffering, to perceive briefly the multiple voices within the Christian Scriptures that shed light on this poignant reality of life. I believe that this book will help students of the Bible, as well as the whole believing community, in seeing the manifold shades of suffering in the Bible. I commend my dear student Naveen Alapati's efforts and congratulate him. May the reading of this book be a resource that helps us live, and even thrive, through the reality of suffering!

Shinu Varghese John
Faculty in Old Testament
India Bible College and Seminary, Kerala

Preface

The sudden surge of the COVID-19 pandemic has caused a severe breakdown, downfall and disorientation of many sectors of our world. The pandemic has exposed the dysfunctionality of our systems as much as it presented the functionality. It has exposed how fragile, vulnerable and insignificant we are in the face of this viral disease. It has shown us how unprepared we are to face sudden calamities such as this.

Ever since the novel Coronavirus aka SARS CoV-2 aka COVID-19 was declared as a pandemic by the World Health Organization in March of 2020, the whole world is battling against this tiny yet deadly virus. Fears gripped everyone's heart. Hopes are shattered and peace is lost. By the time people began to think of the seriousness of this viral disease, it had already invaded a major part of the world. SOS calls are heard everywhere. The dancing and joyfulness had turned into mourning all of a sudden.

Because of being ignorant of the possibilities of a rise of the second and deadly wave of the Coronavirus, and because of lack of preparedness and uncivilized means of responses, India is struck with the massive spread of the virus, fighting to save itself from the fatality. The land has become insufficient to bury or cremate the deceased ones. Things are getting out of control and it is as if we could do nothing but gaze at our own state of helplessness and vulnerability.

While this is the situation, most of us are engulfed with the terrible questions and doubts related to the absence/silence of God, the existence of God, expressing our faith according to the critical moments of fear and hopelessness, and the questions of our responsibility in this era of uncertainties. This small book in your hands is an attempt to address those issues and make sense of Christian faith and responsibility amid catastrophic situations such as this.

I am so grateful to God for His benevolence towards me in strengthening and guiding me to make my dream a reality. I acknowledge the support and encouragement of my family members, classmates and my friends in writing this book. The idea of writing a book like this conceived all of a sudden during a family prayer at the end of April. It took nearly ten days of constant effort to draft it out. It is all by the grace of God I could complete it. I thank my teacher Shinu Varghese sir for writing the foreword and Mrs. Starla Luke for revising and refining the language. I also thank God for all my teachers at India Bible College and Seminary for their support and guidance in my theological studies. Finally, I pray that this book may become a blessing for all readers.

Naveen Alapati
10 May 2021

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CHAPTER ONE

Sitting with Job in the Ashes

Tomorrow, if all literature was to be destroyed
and it was left to me to retain one work only,
I should save Job.

- Victor Hugo

Job is no longer man; he is humanity!
A race which can feel, think, and speak in such a voice
is truly worthy of a dialogue with the divine;
it is worthy of conversing with its creator.

- Alphonse de Lamartine

Our culture is so preoccupied with reasoning and rationality. We are so obsessed with a judgemental attitude that we want to define everything and give reason to everything that happens in the world. Our world struggles to identify and give everything a reason. We are living in a scientific age where everything needs evidence to be accepted. Rationalism is characteristic of modernism that helped the world to progress and explore beyond limits. It is this factor that is essential for growth. However, one drawback with the attitude of rationalism is that it goes so deep in search of the facts that it fails to embrace the realities and respond accordingly.

Modern Christianity is so obsessed with this attitude of reasoning, when the pandemic of COVID-19 began to hit the whole world crashing down all our systems. Most of Christianity, not all of it, was so busy doing home-work to find out the metaphysical reasons behind this viral disease. Until it began to affect Christians, it was interpreted as the judgement of God against the sinners. Later it was interpreted as a sign for the Second Coming of Jesus Christ.

Some blamed China for introducing the virus to the world either because of their conservative systems of ungodly power or because of their predominantly carnivorous eating habits. Finally, here we are, trying to save ourselves from getting drowned in the second wave that has hit the world, particularly India, with still no valid reason to all the suffering. The attitude of reasoning is always present whenever disasters take place, whether in small or large scale. When we are so obsessed with this interpretative mentality, we fail to embrace the reality of pain and suffering. Moreover, the interpretative methods change according to the level of the disaster and according to our experiential knowledge of the pain.

The Book of Job in the Bible calls on us to get wisdom in times of sufferings. In the popular Christian reading, the Book of Job, loses its value because of different preoccupied conceptions regarding human suffering and the justice of God. The majority of Christians only know a Job who is found in the prologue (chapters 1-2) and epilogue (chapter 42) of the Book of Job. They only know a Job who gave thanks to God despite the suffering. They only know a Job who never gave up his righteousness even when he lost everything he owned, afflicted with the severe skin disease, blamed by his friends and stricken down by Satan. They only know a Job who was blessed twofold at the end. But we miss out on a Job who sits in the ashes, mourning, weeping and cursing himself because of the severity of his pain and suffering. We fail to see a Job who struggles with God's justice. We miss out the Job who not only files

a case against God but courageously argues with Him. We miss out on the Job who finally humbles himself before His Creator. Reading through Book of Job in bits and pieces may cause us to miss out what is invaluable in the entire Book. Let us, at the outset, explore how the Book of Job speaks to us afresh and alive in times of pandemic and other times, when all we can do is nothing else but to cry out in agony.

1.1 Unfounded Reasons

Whenever a disaster or pandemic hits the land and causes a great loss to the people, one of the first responses from us Christians is to define it as the wrath of God against sin. We are so quick to quote biblical texts that speak about God's judgement against the ungodly and wicked ones. It was commonplace to view that "good things happen to good people and the bad things to the bad ones." In theological terms, this idea is called as Retribution Principle (RP).

God is a God of the Covenant. He enters into partnership with human beings and works through them in the world. His instructions are part of the covenant. Practicing them keeps us loyal to the covenant and helps us accomplish the vision of God. This is to say, the commandments define the vision of God and practicing them ensures that perfect social life can be formed in a relationship with God. When God made a covenant with the people of Israel, he wanted them to be a priestly kingdom reflecting the vision of God for humankind. They are elected to be a nation that would show the world what it looks like when a nation partners with God and what it means to have Yahweh as their God. To define that sort of life, they are given a great number of commandments to define their personal, social, civil, political and economic life. By practicing all these commandments, Israel becomes a nation that reflects the nature of God and becomes a part of the Kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven.

They are called to show their fidelity and allegiance to Yahweh and follow His commandments. RP comes as a part of the covenant where the blessings are announced over those who stay loyal to Yahweh by obeying His commandments and the curses are announced against those who disobey their God and turn out to be wicked. When we look into the books like Leviticus, Deuteronomy and Proverbs, this idea of RP is defined extensively.

According to this RP, the righteous will prosper and the wicked will be punished. This is a kind of transaction. If people obey God, He will bless them; and if they disobey God, they will be cursed. Careful reading shows us that the list of curses is longer than the list of blessings. This does not mean that they are forced to obey God. A closer look helps us see that the covenant is initiated based on people's choice. This is to say, when God wished to make a covenant with the people and made known all the terms and conditions, it is the people who agreed to all of them and chose to partner with God. Everything that followed later is the result of the people's choice.

Most Old Testament events, barring a few, are defined from the perspective of the RP. Whenever Israel was on the side of Yahweh, they were victorious and prosperous; safe and sound. But whenever disasters like natural calamities or enemy attacks took place, they faced severe disturbance and destruction. The interpretation given by the prophetic circles for this was: Israel's disobedience and rebellion against God. The narrative of Israel's history moves in the direction of RP. This RP was essential for the prophets to call the nation back to fidelity to Yahweh and His covenant.

However, it seems, the RP is not always practically absolute. It is not appropriate to ascribe every natural calamity, disease and war to the moral failure of the nation. Individually and socially, there are several instances where the righteous suffered and the wicked prospered. Reading through the books of the Old Testament, the RP is presented in different forms. In the Torah and Proverbs,

RP seems to be immediate where any moral failure is dealt with instantly. In the case of narrative literature, RP seems to be delayed yet enacted after a certain time. In the case of Daniel, Zechariah and Malachi, it is seen as an eschatological act where God will reward the righteous and punish the wicked at the end of the age. In the case of Ecclesiastes, RP is obsolete and unrealistic because the writer sees both the righteous and the wicked ending up in the same fate. However, in the editorial conclusion of Ecclesiastes, there is a notion that God holds every human being accountable for his/her choices and actions. Thus, therefore, it seems implausible to get an absolute picture of the idea of RP in the Old Testament.

Take a look at the Book of Job where the RP is questioned extremely. The whole dialogue between Job and his friends hangs between defining the justice of God from the perspective of RP. The whole thing begins with God who mentions the righteousness of Job before the Satan[1] who challenges God's knowledge of Job's character. This marks the beginning of Job's afflictions, one after another, depriving him of all his wealth and health. Although Job's response to his suffering seems to be appreciable, his sitting in the ashes and taking the potsherd to scratch his body displays the intensity of his suffering and the agony he went through.

The Book of Job contains a depth of human suffering expressed at an epic level. It is the masterpiece of Hebrew poetry in the Bible and also has the profound wisdom of God's justice concerning human suffering. There is nothing in the Old Testament that can be compared to the excellence of this book. It not only describes the genuineness in expressing one's faith against sufferings

1 The character of the Satan in the Book of Job does not refer to the later Judeo-Christian concept of an evil character who is in rebellion and conflict against the goodness of God. In the Book of Job, *the* Satan, with the definite article, refers to an angelic office. The word Satan simply means *accuser* who holds the responsibility of charging the case against the ones who are guilty. It does not refer to our Christian understanding of a morally evil being who works against God. Therefore, there is no necessity to identify the Satan in the Book of Job as an evil one.

but also in dismantles the traditional trajectory of understanding RP as the definition of God's justice. The words of Job seem to be blasphemous and absolute nonsense to the orthodox pious ones who are preoccupied with the thought that no one should question God. But they are the ones that express genuine faith.

Most of the book deals with Job's dialogue with his orthodox friends who were so obsessed with the RP and commented on the suffering of Job. They were convinced that God being just, does not let His righteous suffer. They argued about the justice of God in such way in order to make Job rethink about his innocence and accept that he had flawed before God. They do not single out or particularize Job's mistakes rather they just make hypothetical assumptions against his moral purity. For them God never causes the righteous to suffer nor does He leave the wicked to go unpunished. With their conventional thoughts, they have limited the justice of God to the straitjacket of RP.

Job, on the other hand, does his best to prove his innocence. According to him, if his friends were right, God is on the wrong track. He unjustly caused the innocent one to suffer. Job never gave up in his arguments that he was not wrong. He felt that it would have been better if God were a human being so that they can go to the trial together and that he can answer God. He self-pitied his helplessness and inability to contend with God. What Job does is not against faith. He has not backslidden to question God's justice and righteousness. The words of Job express genuine faith, a faith that is courageous enough to take hold of God, weep before Him, argue with Him, question His silence, answer Him in boldness and file a case against Him. It is a faith that is not blind and not silent to accept everything and go on in numbness. He does not want to rely on the traditional definitions of God's justice as expressed in the RP. He questions the validity of that sort of traditional faith.

The story of Job is the story of humankind. It is the expression of the depth of the human's state of helplessness in times of suffering.

It expresses the nature of humanity that can converse directly with its Creator and have the courage to question God. But, we are mere mortals and He is God!

The whole argument between Job and his friends depict our state of mentality too. The ultimate concern of their dialogue was to find the reason behind the suffering. The RP is the centre of attention. If RP is proven to be absolute, then Job's friends would win and if it were wrong, Job would win the case. But there is no conclusion. They found no absolute reason behind the suffering. If any of the parties would have won the argument, then it questions the justice of God. Just like Job and his friends, we cannot explore things beyond our scope of wisdom with our limited understanding. Even in the case of this pandemic or any disaster, it is unwise to claim that everything is caused because of human sin. Nor is it necessary to blame Satan for everything because that is not the point argued in the Book of Job. We are not sure of the reasons. We are just in a state of helplessness, struggling hard to handle the crises.

1.2 Plausible Reasons

Another instance in the Bible that rushes through our minds is the narrative of plagues that were sent against hard-hearted Pharaoh and his land. There seems to be a wrong understanding circulating among some Christians based on these events. When the Egyptians happened to be struck with different plagues, the people of Israel were kept safe until the end. There is an emphasis on the event of Passover when death passed over the houses of Israel because of the mark of the blood of the lamb over their doorposts. Some have gone to the extreme of saying that just as the plagues occurred to release Israel, the calamities at the present are just prelude to the deliverance of the Church from the world. Because of this particular ideology, many Christians felt that the virus does not affect those who are redeemed by the Lord. This shows how self-centred we have become that we want God to protect us because

we are Christians. That is simply another way of expressing our obsession with RP and our self-made definitions around it.

The point of the plagues that occurred in Egypt was not merely to let Israel go out of Egypt. No doubt it is the climactic point, but that alone is not its entire purpose. What happens with the plagues is the disillusionment of the self-pride of Pharaoh who used his power and to the extremes of depriving the people of their basic rights of existence. It is aimed to bring down the tyrannical power of Pharaoh who was preoccupied with the conception that he can do whatever he chooses to do and no one can thwart his purposes. It was that state of loftiness and abuse of power that was brought low through the medium of plagues and calamities. The nature of Pharaoh not only expresses the tyrannical powers that claim absolute authority and possession of the powerless ones, enslaving them and misusing the power to abuse human dignity, but also that sense of pride that was unwilling to give a room for God's power. Therefore the plagues in Egypt narrate the conflict between the cruel and oppressive power of Pharaoh and the liberating power of God.

If we are keen to read the biblical texts, numerous other instances speak of God bringing down the pride of the tyrannical powers that are obsessed with the possessiveness over the poor and the powerless ones. There are incidents where the self-exaltation of Nebuchadnezzar was brought down in the Book of Daniel. There were times when the beastly powers were driven out by the force of God's power to liberate His people and His land. Pride over God always leads to self-destruction. God hates that character of human power that tries to take everything into its hands, refusing to be tamed by God, and trying to exercise absolute mastery over the lesser ones claiming supremacy over the others. It is a threat against the continuity of goodness in the creation. It will be brought down by God to liberate the ones who happened to be confined to the degrading state in the society being deprived of their dignity and basic rights.

If we look at our postmodern society we are proud of our progress in our technological innovativeness. Our postmodern world sought to obtain freedom from God so as to define everything on its own terms instead of depending on God's for wisdom, life, and power. Instead of ruling with God on His terms, we desired to rule on our terms, take control of everything and get rid of God. It is not that the world disobeyed God, rather, the world rejected God and His ways of life. We just wanted freedom from God. The attitude was, "if at all God exists, let Him exist in His world not trying to take control over us". Even ignorant Christians, felt that it is better to escape into heaven rather than to be on this earth and try to be earthly. We just wanted to push God out of creation. In the theological and philosophical world, "God is dead!" was the celebrated thought, assuming that human beings have triumphed over God with our power and wisdom and that He is no longer *valid or needed* in our world.

With their self-defined power and wisdom, human beings have always tried to misuse their freedom and create a cruel, oppressive and indifferent society. And in this society many suffer because of the choices and decisions taken by the powerful ones. We live in an age where everyone seeks heights in prosperity and power but are least concerned about the powerless ones whose voices are muted and ignored. We have crossed all limits in every sphere. We began to abuse and misuse natural resources. We trampled over creation even causing extinction of many because of our selfish greed. We, human beings, became a hazardous threat to the rest of the creation. To satisfy our greed, we have disturbed the ecological systems. Not content with the disturbance and destruction of the systems on this planet, we are searching for another planet to continue the same thing. Because of human's greed and pride we are ignorant of the social, ecological, economic, political and spiritual systems that are broken down.

Every disaster is not God made, but they stem forth as the consequences of our own choices and actions. These calamities and pandemics knock down our pride of self-reliance. Desiring freedom from God, we have gone so far as to misuse everything that is given to us. Now we just stand accountable before God for all our pride and selfish greed. We realise how incapable our self-made systems are to save us. We have realised that we are not the masters over the creation of God.

However, although this is the plausible reason behind the cause of all the disasters and pandemics from now on, we cannot be content with this nor is it an absolute answer to our quest for the root cause.

1.3 Looking Beyond Rationality

In all their discussion, Job and his friends were unable to pin point the reason behind the affliction, pain and suffering. The whole dramatic poem leads to the point where God Himself comes down to speak for Himself. He speaks neither on the side of Job nor on the side of his friends. While the whole point of the dialogue between Job and his friends was to approve or disapprove of the validity of the Retribution Principle, the whole point of every speech of God was to define His power, wisdom and sovereignty displayed in His decisive actions.

God speaks on His behalf. He does not mention the cause of suffering nor does he approve the validity of the RP. He interrogatively engages in direct dialogue with Job. He expounds His majestic wisdom and power that Job wouldn't have considered if it wasn't mentioned. God simply wanted Job to look beyond his state of suffering and understand the splendour of Divine wisdom manifested through His creative work. He cares for and takes control of every minute thing in creation which is beyond simply focusing on an individual's life.

After listening to the long self-declarations of God, Job realized that God is wise in all his dealings. Job realized that his knowledge and understanding of God is so limited that he could not notice the reality of God's nature and His dealings. All through his arguments and complaints, Job tried to evaluate God's justice based on his suffering. But when God finally came to speak on behalf of Himself, Job realized that all his arguments stemmed out of his limited knowledge and they confined God to a specific structure. He replies to God with confessions of understanding His Sovereignty and infallibility.

Well, that might seem a rude conclusion and that might show God as a tyrant who can do whatever he wants and simply silence the questions against Him. The point here is to show that human counsel is not always reliable. With our limited understanding, we try to reason and find out the root cause of everything. We are so busy assessing the character and wisdom of God from our knowledge of suffering. Until the suffering hits us, we speak like Job's friends who condemns the sufferer to be the sinner. But the whole wisdom of the Book of Job is to show that God's wisdom is far more reliable than our rationalistic approaches.

We find two sides of Job – one who thanks God amid the suffering and as one who questions God's character. Both are not mutually opposite; rather both are the expressions of genuine faith – the faith that is not mute but defends itself by conversing with the Creator. It is a faith that hesitates to be hypocrite by hiding all the pain. It is a kind of faith that tries to express itself in the most sincere way without hiding traumatic experiences.

In this pandemic, when the suffering around is too intense and painful to be silent and calm, let us sit with Job in the ashes, setting aside our rationalism to define the cause of suffering. Instead of digging out to find the root causes, let us embrace the pain. Let us accept the reality of the pain. Let us stand before the Creator as humble creatures that do not know everything beyond limitations.

Suffering is not always because of sin. Instead of being obsessed with a judgemental mentality, let us show solidarity with the Jobs around us.

> *Seeing how struck we are with the pandemic, with the fears haunting every one of us and in utter helplessness, we realize how fragile we are, O Lord! We confess that we are mere creatures and we stand accountable before you for our misuse of freedom with our selfish pride. We realize that our rationalism is not the reply to all the things we experience and our wisdom does not work out in answering all our pains. Lord, we realize that we are no more than humble creatures, so weak and powerless to handle these severities. In the extremities of our suffering, we rely upon your wisdom. Your wisdom, O Lord, is beyond our limited scope of understanding. We admit that we cannot assess your character based on our ideals of justice. We are here unable to defend ourselves before your unfathomable wisdom and power. Now we sit in the ashes looking at our own pitiful state of condition.*

CHAPTER TWO

Walking with Jesus to Golgotha

Compassion constitutes a radical form of criticism,
for it announces that the hurt is to be taken seriously,
that the hurt is not to be accepted as normal and natural
but is an abnormal and unacceptable condition for humanness.
- Walter Brueggemann

God is not only the God of the sufferers but the God who suffers….
It is said of God that no one can behold his face and live…
perhaps it meant that no one could see his sorrow and live.
Or perhaps his sorrow is splendour.
- Nicholas Wolterstorff

One of the serious theological issues that bewilder most of us during this pandemic or during any severe troubled times is this: "Where is God right now?" or "Why is God so silent?" Although oftentimes it begins with our traditional understanding of the Retribution Principle, the question echoes beyond it. It is a quest to make sense of God's presence in times of suffering. It is a quest to find the faithfulness of God in the times of extremities of painful realities.

The question about God's presence is not always a question out of unbelief. Sometimes the same question comes from those who once have very closely experienced God. Doubt about God is

not always something that is against our faith. Doubt sometimes nourishes our faith, especially when that is not murmuring against God. It expresses the genuineness of faith that seeks to explore beyond the limitations and traditional understanding. It is a faithful and honest struggle with God to know more about who He is and how He works. It is a faith that does not want to settle down as blind being insensible to surrounding crises. It is a faith that does not want to stay deaf and dumb before God. It is a faith that seeks understanding. Therefore doubting God's presence, out of humility and genuine quest, to make sense about God in the turbulent times serves as a signpost to have a deeper understanding of God.

As the doubts crop up in our minds and haunt us, let us turn to the Bible to gain insight of how God is presented in it. Because, Jesus is the ultimate embodiment of God's Truth in fullness and in Jesus we find the culminating revelation of God.

2.1 God of the Downstairs

God is pictured in elite terms. His greatness and attributes like omnipotence, omniscience, omnipresence, immutability and many other characteristics make God unique and incomparable. Nothing that can be equated or be compared to God. Perhaps that might be the reason why God does not want to express Himself through any idolized form. He is incomparable in His immeasurable power, wisdom and nature. He is holy (unique) in all of His characteristics. He is beyond our space and wholly unlike us. In one word, He is transcendent.

However, that is not the whole picture of God as we see in the Bible. Although He is the Most High, we see Him working from the lowliest places. Sometimes, to make sense of His nature and works, it is essential for us to go downstairs. We see Him out there working in and through the powerless and the meekest forms of human existence. Often we desire to climb up the spiritual ladder to reach God while God wishes to express Himself at the other end of

the ladder, calling us to come down and meet Him in those deepest places.

He is the God who intended to rule the whole creation with humans as His partners. As the poet rightly observes in Psalm 8, human beings are powerless creatures as compared with the rest of the creation. But God chose to make us, the weakest forms of existence in this universe, to be His partners. He is attentive to the outcry of the blood of the innocent, listens to the agony of the slaves, liberates and makes them His possession. He is there in the darkest valleys. He is there in the deepest darkness. He is out there working the downstairs, calling everyone in those lowliest places. We can see God journeying with the people rather than piloting them. We can also see Him making the deserts His dwelling places.

Another astounding nature of God's identification with the lowly ones is His desire to dwell with the human beings. He is not the one who simply lives in His world, visiting the earth occasionally, and calling the people into His world, rather He is also someone whose desire is to fill the earth with His presence. He is here on the earth just as He is in heaven.

We see God becoming the voice of the voiceless in the society who live in the most miserable conditions because of the greedy and draconian powers of the world. He is out there calling the arrogant ones to step down and take notice of those in the crisis. He is out there ministering to those vulnerable forms of life that have become the victims of the evil choices of the world. He is there, not simply making their life better, but also taking charge of the lofty ones for not considering the lower ones and for mistreating them. Yes, you can call Him the God of the poor, powerless and voiceless because He wishes to express Himself even in those realities of life.

Most of the time we see Him as the God of the faithful remnant – a minority of the society that chose to be loyal to its God. He is out there not looking for the majority to stand on His side rather taking the side of those lesser ones even to the extent of

challenging the majority to become like this minority and consider them. This does not deny that He is the God of all and that all need to acknowledge Him. Yet, ironically, He expresses Himself as the God of small things.

Our society needs a kind of spirituality that acknowledges God who is downstairs. We need a kind of faith that serves God who has Himself dedicated to ministering to the lowliest forms of life. It is there we make much sense of God. This nature of God is expressed through His characteristic attributes such as compassion – a nature of feeling the reality of pain, mourning with sufferers, and healing the hurt – and grace, which is a character of taking the side of the ones who are considered as undeserved ones and are put in the unwanted places of the society. God's attention to the people who are at the lowliest places does not merely mean that He is delivering them but also feeling their pain, their agony and working with them to set things right.

This dynamic nature of God continued to express itself in the person and work of Jesus the Messiah. In the person of Jesus, we find God's revolutionary benevolent nature in its peak point.

2.2 Glory of God embracing the Chaotic Darkness

We all are familiar with the story of creation that is narrated in the first pages of our Bible. There we find God setting things right. He transforms the wild and waste lands into an orderly and perfected world making it a habitable place for both God and human beings to live together. Verse 2 of Genesis 1 describes, *the wild and wasteful land was covered with deep waters and there was darkness all around. There is no light and no life*. In one word, everything was darkness and chaos. It is there we see God being present. The Spirit of God was moving over, embracing, that chaotic darkness.

We know God dwells in the high places, where everything is blissful. Most of the time we imagine God is surrounded by the immense unapproachable light. He is Lord God Almighty, who

dwells in places where there is neither sorrow, darkness, suffering nor weeping. There is also the other side of God that is expressed in His identification with sorrow, suffering, darkness and weeping. That is what we find in Genesis; where God, before He begins to create an ordered and perfect space, moves in the darkness – in the chaotic darkness. This unequalled character of God is expressed powerfully in the life and work of Jesus Christ.

In Jesus, God who formed the world and filled it with life, who brought into perfection the disordered and empty land, stepped into the world to bring light and life into it. Jesus is the Word that became flesh. He is the God who dwelt and continues to dwell among us. It revokes the theme of the tabernacle in the Old Testament which is the embodiment of the presence of God and where the glory of God is manifested among the people. The word *glory* refers to the heaviness of the majestic presence of the royal one. Jesus is the glory of God and the tabernacle too which carried it. "We saw his glory, full of grace and truth!" attests the writer of the Fourth Gospel (John 1:14). This statement is not simply the eye-witness statement but an announcement, a joyous heralding of the good news, "God dwelt among us! We beheld His glory! We saw it in Jesus! Come and see!" Jesus is the glory of God *par excellence*, the preeminent embodiment of God. The story of Jesus is narrated in such a way that it is as if God has come into our space and time, reclaiming the world back to Himself, becoming in charge of the world, taking control of the things, setting things right, forgiving the sins, and offering holistic salvation. This is the good news – the good news that God has come so close in the person of Jesus.

Jesus is the ultimate signpost to understand where God is and what He does. This is to say, the places we find Jesus in are the places we find God, the things Jesus did are the works of God. It is in Jesus we find what it means for God to take control of the things and become King of the world. But we do not find so extraordinary in his person; I mean he appeared to be so weak, so ordinary and

so gentle and meek. This does not mean that the extraordinariness is underlying the ordinariness of Jesus rather, to be precise, the extraordinariness of God deliberately expressed itself through ordinariness, weakness and meekness of Jesus the Messiah.

While Jesus is the glory of God, the manifestation of the fullness of God in the human person, we could see the glory of God embracing the darkness. It does not mean that it is incapable of bringing the light rather it willingly endures darkness before the light, and life breaks through that chaotic darkness. Embracing the darkness is not simply to light it up but also to share in that darkness and be enveloped by the suffering and pain. It is immersing fully in the conditions of vulnerability, mourning, and suffering not simply triumphing over them with the power rather making the vulnerability itself a source of empowering the people. In other words, it is not always through God's immeasurable power that humans are empowered, strengthened and healed, but it is also through God's vulnerability and weakness, we are healed and restored. For God's willingness to embrace darkness is the powerful manifestation of His glory. For a while let us see how Jesus, the Glory of God, is seen in the times of suffering.

It was in a poor home that Jesus was born. He was a helpless baby vulnerable to the troublesome conditions of his family. He happened to lie down in the manger soon after his birth because there was neither a room nor a bed available for him at the inn. The inn was full because there was a great influx of people heading back to their hometowns. While new kings usually begin their lives at the royal palaces, here is a new King whose birth is a criticism of the popular conception of power, which is nothing but wresting the service of the people through strategic means of control. Herod's royal palace was no place for Jesus to begin his life. His beginning happens in the weakness, lying in vulnerability to the cruel and oppressive forms of the royal power.

The whole life of Jesus was spent exposed to vulnerability, weakness and meekness in the service of the least of humankind. Compassion was the integral character of Jesus. Compassion does not simply mean feeling sorry for others' pain, it is feeling the hurt and pain of the others. It is getting involved with the weakness of others. It is sharing in the suffering, sorrow, chaotic darkness and helplessness in others' lives. It is a character by which a person becomes identified with the suffering one and feels the depth of the pain they are going through. It is not simply an emotional breakdown for others but also an active response towards people's condition and trying the best means to spare them from the dangers of life. Such is the compassionate nature we find in the person of Jesus. To be precise, it is God overwhelming with compassion towards the miserable conditions of the people in and through the person of Jesus the Messiah. It is God's impossibility to keep Himself from getting involved in the unexplainable, anxious and agonizing mourning of the people who happen to live in conditions exposed to the consequences of the selfish desires of the powerful ones.

One of the key incidents where we find the compassion of Jesus, the glory of God, in the fullest sense is at the tomb of Lazarus. The death of Lazarus caused an inevitable and severe loss to the bereaved family. It was inexpressible sorrow for Martha and Mary who might have felt as if the enemy captured what was most precious to them. The words that they uttered to Jesus shows the pain, confusion, shock and disturbance they were going through. They felt they were surrounded by the thick cloud of darkness and many questions began to heap up in their minds. When Jesus visited Bethany, the hometown of Lazarus, he was not standing before the bereaved sisters as if he was untouched by the overwhelming sorrow of those sisters. Of course, he knew that he could raise Lazarus from death because he was the life-giving God. We can also see him encouraging the weeping family assuring them of his glorious presence. However, that attitude of Jesus did not keep him

from breaking down. As soon as he rushed to the tomb of Lazarus, he began to weep.

The weeping of Jesus, the preeminent glory of God, speaks a lot more than his smile does. His weeping is the deconstruction of the popular idea of power. It is not weeping because all the power is lost and the king is dethroned. It is not a kind of weeping of a political leader who does so to catch the attention of the people. Jesus was not weeping because he did not have power to bring people back to life. He was weeping even when He was in possession of all His power. He was weeping despite His knowledge that Lazarus could be raised back to life. He was weeping as the King, not to be sympathized by the people, but to be compassionate towards the bereaved, disturbed and anxious.

Well, let me state that, Jesus was the tabernacle presence of God on earth as it is in heaven. He is the perfect embodiment of the God who forms life and light in the places of disorder and chaos. But in Jesus, we see that glory of God out there, walking to the tomb of Lazarus. Out there, weeping. It is a moment of silence when God shares the depth of human pain. It is not simply that He knows pain in a subjective sense rather He feels the pain. Engaging Himself in experiencing the terrible sorrow caused by death, He shares in the pain of losing beloved ones. Of course, death saddens God as much as it saddens us. Death is the enemy that robs creation from continuing in goodness and righteousness. It is a point that ceases the continuation of the function of goodness in the world. Well, the miracle in the story of Lazarus is not just that he is risen back to life but also that God is getting involved in the complexities and sorrows of human life. In other words, Jesus' weeping at the tomb of Lazarus is the powerful manifestation of God's immediacy to us not only in restoring us but also in getting involved with us in our pain. Weeping expresses the genuineness of the compassion of God. But one thing to notice is that the weeping is not an emotional breakdown out of hopelessness but out of a willingness to submit to

the harsh realities of life rather than trying to escape them.

The questions that haunt many of us in the pandemic are, "Why does God not just stop the virus from spreading? Why hasn't He taking control of the things? Why does He allow it to spread with rapid speed? Why is He so silent at the death of our beloved ones?" Perhaps the same kind of questions haunted the people who were present at the tomb of Lazarus. Questions of the absence of the Lord in times of severe trouble aggravated their pain. But when Jesus visits the tomb, he does not answer all of them by heaping up the arguments. He does not ask them to repent for their sins. He just weeps in silence. He is taking control of the things but, perhaps, by weeping. Of course, God becomes in-charge of the severe times, perhaps, by shedding tears in silence.

Let's see the glory of God at the cross. The death of Jesus was not merely a deliberate sacrifice but also the consequence of his revolutionary kind of ministry that criticized the ideology of the popular and official power and spirituality. The cross is the identification of God with the extremes of human pain, agony, affliction and rejection. He is out there experiencing extreme suffering. On the cross, Jesus felt as if He were abandoned by God because such was the horrific trauma He was going through along with His physical impairment. He felt thirsty and there was no one to quench it, none to answer His loud cries of pain and agony. He was ridiculed, isolated, rejected and defamed in public. There was no one to help Him out. He lost the company of his closest friends and beloved ones. He struggled to breathe as his body hung from the nails. To put it in our contemporary language: '*He lacked oxygen to breathe and endured isolation*'. When he breathed his last, someone had to request his body for burial. In other words, even his dead body needed official permission to be buried.

The death of Jesus is not just *for* us. He also *died with us*. In His death, Jesus manifests the glory of God powerfully in His identification with the most vulnerable and powerless ones. It is

not merely that Jesus experienced suffering in His human nature while His divine power remained restrained. Instead, it was the Divine power and authority that was willingly expressed through the weakness and vulnerability of Jesus. It is God's willingness to express Himself through the weak and fragile humanity, sharing in the lowliest conditions of human life.

Amidst this pandemic that has created great havoc and confusion around the world and especially in our nation, let us try to see God who seems to be 'at the downstairs', expressing Himself in Jesus through the weakest forms of the human condition. He is out there suffering the scarcity of oxygen supply along with us. He is out there lying in the manger being vulnerable to the uncertainties, along with those who are suffering on the streets due to non-availability of hospital beds. God is with those who are critical and struggling to breathe, battling for life. He is out there weeping at the tombs of the deceased ones. The heart-breaking scenes of overflowing crematoriums and burial grounds are breaking His heart too. He is out there in our world and our times, embracing the darkness, getting involved in our most vulnerable conditions. He is out there dying with us. This is where we find God. Perhaps this is how God works in times of terrible conditions.

2.3 Outbreak of Daylight

We see God in the Bible not simply sharing in the darkest situations of life and the horrors of the vulnerable human conditions, but is also dismantling the power of the chaotic darkness by bringing life and light into the places that were wild and wasteful. The story of Jesus does not stop with the childhood of helplessness but continues with the narration of his ability to converse and dialogue fearlessly with the religious leaders of His day. It does not stop with Jesus embracing the pain of the suffering ones but continues with offering them a new life through healing. It does not cease with Jesus weeping at the tomb of Lazarus but continues with

raising him back to life against all the odds. It does not stop with the horrible death but continues to the narrative of the empty tomb, the dawn of the new life and new age.

If God Himself shares in our extremities of suffering, involves in our pain and struggle for life, then where is the hope? The hope lies there, out there in the willingness of God to express Himself in our vulnerability. It is through His weeping, we receive joy. It is through his wounds we are healed. It is through his sorrows we are restored. God sharing in our chaotic situations is not an end of all but is the new beginning. It is the point from which hope arises. In other words, the vulnerability of God is engaged not in making us more hopeless but in beginning a new life.

There is a hope of resurrection, not in the distant future but in our present times. It does not merely refer to the literal raising of the dead but is a call to be a national restoration, as described in Ezekiel 37. It is the resurrection of the nation back to life, functionality and normalcy. While things around us seem to be getting out of control, God is in control of things. God being in control does not necessarily mean that God is simply piloting things. Instead, He is in control things by getting involved in the suffering and by expressing His glorious compassion.

While there is hope for an outbreak of the daylight, a day of resurrection, a day of ordering, perfecting the chaos, there is also a time of mourning, weeping, experiencing misery and vulnerability. Let us not only see God at the places we usually place Him. In His freedom, God is both sharing the pains of the people and also working with those who genuinely struggle to make things right and restore peace. He is out there working with those who feel compassionate over the people.

> *Lord, we realize that you are with us in these turbulent times, sharing in our weakness and sorrows. Help us to see you in the places of brokenness and chaos, embracing the darkness of our life. Help our unbelief, our questions*

and our challenges. Help us to seek You in the places where there is sorrow and confusion. Help us to seek You and identify You downstairs. Open our eyes to gaze at Your glory that brings light and life into our situations through tears of pain.

CHAPTER THREE

Weeping with the Captives in the Ruined Land

I shall look at the world through tears.
Perhaps I shall see things that, dry-eyed, I could not see.
- Nicholas Wolterstorff

God continues to be remembered,
and the memory is kept alive in the complaints.
They are placed before God in the hope
that God's compassion will be aroused.
- Claus Westermann

We are going through the times and conditions which inevitably stirs us to shed tears of pain, anguish and helplessness, unless we are hard-hearted and inhumane. Our hearts melt when we think of the countless people dying each day because of this pandemic. The terrific scenes of the crematoriums and burial grounds, a visual of thousands of patients gasping for oxygen inside and outside hospitals, a great number of people rushing to the hospitals to save their lives, the healthcare workers being exhausted of their ceaseless efforts, and many more unexplainable sufferings, simply break our hearts.

Let me share a story of a woman, our church member, whose family was affected with COVID-19. She lives with her family in Karnataka while her siblings and mother reside in another state.

Her elder sister succumbed to the COVID-19 virus while her brother and his family are in a critical condition and oblivious to the fact that one of them has died. They are fighting for their lives. And this woman, in Karnataka, could do nothing more than grieve helplessly and mourn that she could not be present with her family members. She is devastated. This is a sample - just a microscopic view of condition of our land.

Our land is devastated, ruined and helpless. How great is the misery of mother India! Her pain is great among the nations. She weeps bitterly in the darkest depths. All the light that she now sees are the burning flames in the crematoriums. She sits lonely in deserted places. All her joyous feasts have turned to groans of pain. All her people groan in the villages and cities, crying out for help. Death is crouching at every street, wandering from door to door, to shatter her family. The land that once was full of people, bustling with children playing in the dirt of the streets, people gathering together celebrating peace and serenity, travellers enjoying the beauty of nature – are all fallen empty now. Who can explain her distress? Her princes have become her predators and her crowns have become her captors. The cries of agony are reaching the skies. What a pitiful condition this is! What a pathetic hour!

I think this is the time when the Book of Lamentations and psalms of lament speak afresh to us. It poetically articulates our inexpressible and deep pain. It becomes our voice when we are spellbound, our guide for prayer when things do not make any sense. They assist us to cry out so that we can be healed and restored. For now, let's stick to the Book of Lamentations:

3.1 Power of Laments

The Babylonian invasion of the land of Judah in 586 BC was a devastating experience for the people of God. The invading forces of King Nebuchadnezzar entered into the fortified walls of the city of Jerusalem plundering the land and murdering everyone in

sight. The temple was burnt and the whole city was brought to the grounds. Many fell prey to the bloodthirsty swords of the enemies and many lost their beloved ones to the fierce anger of the invading army. All of a sudden, the city is no more. All that could be seen is the ruined land where the people are forced to leave their homes. They are chased down to be murdered. It was like there was no home left out and no street without bloodshed.

Religiously, their faith was at the stake. They were confused with unanswerable questions about the absence and silence of their God. They felt as if they were driven out by their own God. Some have even thought of their God falling to the power of Nebuchadnezzar. While many questions create a psycho-spiritual storm, they could do nothing about it. They could do nothing but to weep, weep bitterly in the nights. All they could do is just to remember their homeland, sitting beside the rivers of Babylon. Only a handful of people were left in the ruined city. It was the time when their faith was facing a serious struggle. Emotionally, they were devastated whenever they remembered their destroyed homes and ruined nation. Perhaps every single memory haunted them, making them restless.

The Book of Lamentations is the faithful expression of individual and national sorrow of the bereaved. It is overflowing grief with unanswered questions over the condition of their nation. The whole book consists of five poems in which the poets, whether Jeremiah or any witness of the scene, articulate their pain using the best means of Hebrew poetic styles. It is a funeral song of the nation. It is the commemoration of the greatest nightmare in their lifetime.

All that we see in the Book of Lamentations is sorrow, pain, confusion, devastation, anguish, anger, anxiety and suffering expressed poetically using figurative language. All that we find is darkness and chaos from the beginning to the end of the book. There are several complaints addressed to God. But the uniqueness of these laments and wails is that the poets are still dogged in their

loyalty to their God, Yahweh. Even in times of deepest sorrows when all they want to do is to complain, they do it out of their loyalty to Yahweh. Their complaints, grievances, laments and mourning keep their faith alive. Their God is still remembered in their complaints. They cling on to their God even in times when they feel their God has kicked them out.

It is because of their bounden loyalty to God, there is a ray of hope, evident and underlying in all the lamentations. Their hope is based on their faith in the steadfastness of Yahweh. Because they sense that God has not given up His loyal steadfast love (*chesed*) towards His people, their hope is renewed and refreshed. However, that hope does not negate their lament nor does their lament negate their hope. The Book of Lamentations is a memory of darkness without entirely denying the probability of the light.

The complaints are inevitable but they are directed to God rather than towards their enemies. They feel that they are devastated because of the anger of their God. Yet they still cling to Him and share all of their hopelessness with Him. They do so out of their hope that they can find compassion in Him. They are not simply praying for the restoration but also letting out all of their pain expressed before God so that their laments can be answered one day. In other words, while doubts haunt them, they make those doubts known to God instead of nesting up the unbelief out of their bitterness towards God. Yes, they go through grave experiences but they share their bitterness before God.

Doubtless, that the poems of the Book of Lamentations are the expression of our own emotional breakdown when we run out of words. The poet pens overwhelming individual grief and national sorrow in these lines. The ruined land is pictured as a shattered woman, who sits lonely as a widow. The readers are led into the darkest valleys where pain and brokenness are in their acutest form. I have just picked out some texts from the book that reflect our situation.

How lonely sits the city
that once was full of people!
How like a widow she has become,
she that was great among the nations!
She that was a princess among the provinces
has become a vassal.

Judah has gone into exile
with suffering and hard servitude;
she lives now among the nations,
and finds no resting place;
her pursuers have all overtaken her
in the midst of her distress.

The roads to Zion mourn,
for no one comes to the festivals;
all her gates are desolate,
her priests groan;
her young girls grieve,
and her lot is bitter.

Her foes have become the masters,
her enemies prosper,
because the LORD has made her suffer
for the multitude of her transgressions;
her children have gone away,
captives before the foe.

From daughter Zion has departed all her majesty.
Her princes have become
like stags that find no pasture;
they fled without strength
before the pursuer.

Jerusalem remembers,
in the days of her affliction and wandering,
all the precious things
that were hers in days of old.
When her people fell into the hand of the foe,
and there was no one to help her,
the foe looked on mocking over her downfall. (1:1-7)

My eyes are spent with weeping;
my stomach churns;
my bile is poured out on the ground
because of the destruction of my people,
because infants and babes faint
in the streets of the city.

They cry to their mothers,
"Where is bread and wine?"
as they faint like the wounded
in the streets of the city,
as their life is poured out
on their mothers' bosom.

What can I say for you,
to what compare you,
O daughter Jerusalem?
To what can I liken you,
that I may comfort you,
O virgin daughter Zion?
For vast as the sea is your ruin; who can heal you? (2:11-13)

The tongue of the infant sticks
to the roof of its mouth for thirst;
the children beg for food,
but no one gives them anything.

Those who feasted on delicacies
perish in the streets;
those who were brought up in purple
cling to ash heaps.

For the chastisement of my people
has been greater than the punishment of Sodom,
which was overthrown in a moment,
though no hand was laid on it.

Her princes were purer than snow,
whiter than milk;
their bodies were more ruddy than coral,
their hair like sapphire.

Now their visage is blacker than soot;
they are not recognized in the streets.
Their skin has shrivelled on their bones;
it has become as dry as wood. (4:4-8)

Blindly they wandered through the streets,
so defiled with blood
that no one was able
to touch their garments.

"Away! Unclean!" people shouted at them;
"Away! Away! Do not touch!"
So they became fugitives and wanderers;
it was said among the nations,
"They shall stay here no longer." (4:14-15)

Our world, and particularly our nation, is also going through a similar emotional breakdown. People are lying in the streets,

groaning in pain and suffering. It is too much for us to tackle. In such times of chaos and distress, let us mourn. Let us weep, lament and cry out to the Lord. Lamentations call us to soften our hearts and look at the world with teary eyes. When our eyes are wet, we can see the things that we would not see with normal eyes. Laments are not the expressions of shame, unbelief and distrust rather they are complaints that sustain our faith, our remembrance of God and our hope in Him. They call us to leave out our comfort zones.

Laments are painfully beautiful because they are directed towards God. They are an honest memoir of tragedy and humility. They are the tears of pain that call God to be compassionate. It is not simply a cry for restoration but also for renovation. Laments are powerful because they disagree with the present conditions of the world and are looking for a time of renewal and restoration. It is a strong disagreement with the chaotic darkness in looking for the steadfast love of God that lightens up the darkness. Laments are the powerful expressions that we are not indifferent to the situations. It is a kind of spirituality that we want to embrace darkness instead of escaping from the realities into a better world.

3.2 A Critique of Dysfunctional Systems

One of the underlying themes in the Book of Lamentations is the sorrow for the individual and national sin and corruption because of which the consequences are so severe. There is an idea that God is punishing them because of their wickedness and inability to turn to the Lord when He called. The sin is not simply in terms of murder, adultery, cheating, idolatry, etc. but also in terms of social injustice, violence, inhumanness, oppression, corruption, discrimination, inequity, and choosing all sorts of evil. Sin and evil are much bigger than minimalist ideas of individualistic flaws.

The poets of Lamentations express their deep sorrow for being wrong in the past. They express the pain of suffering the consequences of their wicked choices and actions of the whole

nation. In other words, they are reaping what they have sown in the past. But this harvest causes a lot of pain. It hurts a lot to reap the results of their crooked choices and disobedience. While expressing their pain of being handed over to the consequences of their own selfish attitude, the poets are not merely pleading for God's mercy but also expressing their willingness to amend their ways.

However, it is not only about sorrow for sins committed. There is also a criticism of the evil choices and actions of the socio-religious leaders because of which they are suffering now. It is not simply blaming someone else for their suffering rather a critical lament over the failure of their systems. It is a pain that they have to go through the darkest times as a nation because of the dysfunction of their leaders. If they were alert and taken the right measures to stabilize the society, the destruction would not have been so huge. Even if there was pain, it would be tolerable. But because the official systems chose crooked ways, the pain became intolerable and the lament of the nation is intensified.

Criticism of the failing systems does not refer to the degraded nature of the society. It is only those who have healthy eyes in the social and religious circles could speak against the injustice and corruption of the systems. However, the criticism is not out of hatred but out of a desire to see the things being set right and a vision to see the society functioning well. Whenever the prophets and poets stood against their official authorities, they did it out of their faith that their leaders must stand as the channels of God's presence and governance in their nation. Whenever they saw that power is being misused, they opposed it with a vision to see the nation growing in justice and righteousness.

The grief intensifies, as one thinks of the crooked choices made by the national heads. Sometimes, those elected to protect the nation and guard its welfare have turned into ravenous wolves. They howl in the cities to satisfy their selfish greed. The way the central system of authority has responded to the pandemic or

any other issue in the nation has become the cause to worsen the situation and make things unbearable. The unpreparedness and lack of foresight display the irresponsibility of the leaders of the nation. Sometimes, they have taken barbaric and *uncivilized* ways to respond to the pandemic.

Earlier, the sudden decisions without the flexibility caused great loss of lives and especially of those who lived in the margins. The actions taken by the leaders might have been wise and decisive but they were biased. Everyone knows the pain and struggle of the migrants who walked along the roads of the nation to reach their native places. This is to say, the poor and powerless ones in the nation are not taken into consideration when the actions were implemented. It was only after their suffering had become the inevitable reality, they were taken to consideration. Let me say one thing here when God defines the behaviour of a society, the meekest and weakest forms of life are taken into consideration. Failure to foresee their troubles is the failure of proper justice.

Much can be said of the *unschooled* type of response of the leaders to this pandemic which gave rise to an even more deadly second wave. Medicine and vaccines were sold out to other countries before the nation's crisis was brought under control. The victory over the pandemic is celebrated too early without being able to foresee the sudden surge of the second wave. Much of the advice and warnings of experts ignored to increase the reputation of the self-made decisions. The uncontrolled election campaigns, large crowds partaking in religious gatherings, failure to upgrade our medical system to tackle the surge, lagging and delaying to make decisions to control the second wave, silencing any criticism or question against the misuse of power – all these and more are a public display of our sadly dysfunctional system. The blind nationalist agendas have caused much ruin to the land in the disguise of progression, development and reputation. It is inevitable to say that our systems are too busy in teaching the whole world

of its (*falsified and exaggerated*) supremacy in the religious and cultural heritage (exaggerated idea of *Mera Bharat Mahan*) while they have forgotten how broken it is within itself and how chaotic are its conditions.

I don't say that the entire reason for the nation's struggle to tackle the pandemic is our system of authority. But these systems have been dysfunctional and added to the pain by taking uncontrolled and barbaric methods of responding to the pandemic. In a critical lens, India's COVID-19 crisis is a result of injustice, not a moment of misfortune. The dysfunction of the Church is not any less. Until it began to hit us severely, the pandemic was considered as the expression of God's wrath and many of the Christian ministers and leaders worked to spread this escapist notion. Moreover, the believers are made to rely upon overconfidence that God would never allow His people to suffer. The scriptures that speak of God's protection are taken to develop the (*falsified*) protective systems and ignore the reality of pain and severity of the suffering. Some are made to believe that God would heal all those who trust in Him and that failure to trust in Him leads to death. God would indeed heal and protect His people but those things are not to be taken advantage of to test the faithfulness of the Lord. Christians are not immunized and vaccinated against the sufferings. Being in the world, we ought to expect the same things that happen to all the people in common. Viral diseases, natural catastrophes and other calamities are not a platform to test God's protection and healing.

Now, we weep and lament with the poets of Lamentations, grieving over the failure of the systems that have caused much loss to the nation. It is a lament with hope for God to be in charge of things. We feel sorrow for making evil and crooked choices. Now, we are in a state of being helpless and prone to the consequences of our own wicked choices.

What can I say for you,
to what compare you,

O daughter Jerusalem?
To what can I liken you,
that I may comfort you,
O virgin daughter Zion?
For vast as the sea is your ruin;
who can heal you?

Your prophets have seen for you
false and deceptive visions;
they have not exposed your iniquity
to restore your fortunes,
but have seen oracles for you
that are false and misleading. (2:13-14)

It was for the sins of her prophets
and the iniquities of her priests,
who shed the blood of the righteous
in the midst of her. (4:13)

3.3 Weeping with those who weep

As discussed earlier, Lamentations help us to express the depth of our hearts. They are overloaded with emotional breakdown and reading through them diligently bring tears to our eyes. Perhaps that's what we ought to do. Weep, groan, lament, complain and cry out loud! That is our honest faith, the genuine faith. It is a faith that embraces the pain and struggle of the nation. It is an inevitable sorrow by looking at the devastated nation. Perhaps that's the most powerful thing because it fuels our trust and hope in the Lord. It helps us to see the things around us with better perspective. Unless our eyes are filled with tears, at least once, we cannot be compassionate enough, we cannot understand the pain enough and we cannot lament enough.

Lamentations are the best and honest expression of our faith in the Lord. Yes, there are struggles to cope up with the realities and to digest our feeling of God's absence. But lamenting in His presence shows our loyalty to Him and expressing that we still cling on to Him despite our feeling that we are stricken by His hands. Let me emphasise that honest faith gives rise to hope. Out there, in the middle of all anguish, confusion and complaints, there is a hope that is deeply rooted in the loyal love of the Lord. God is not indifferent to the cries that call for compassion. Surely God shows His mercy upon us and we will rise again.

Meanwhile, let us share the anxiety of our nation. Let us get involved, like Jesus, in the laments of others. Let us identify ourselves with all those who are going through the tough times. Let our voices join their confusions and complaints. As we bring encouragement and hope to the hopeless world, let us also weep with those who weep. Let us show solidarity with the suffering world. Let us not simply look forward to immortality and healing, instead let us focus on our brokenness, our fragility and our mortality so that our voices may be tuned with those who lament. Let us cease to make merry. Let us turn our parties and celebrations into times of laments and mourning. Let us go into the darkness, see the lonely and devastated nation weeping and groaning lonely in the shadows. Let our confusions and complaints be turned into laments.

The thought of my affliction
and my homelessness
is wormwood and gall!
My soul continually thinks of it
and is bowed down within me.

But this I call to mind,
and therefore I have hope:
The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases,
his mercies never come to an end;

they are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness.
"The LORD is my portion,"
says my soul, "therefore I will hope in him." (3:19-24)

CHAPTER FOUR

Sailing with Paul in the Storm

A Christian Community therefore is a healing community,
not because wounds are cured and pains are alleviated,
but because wounds and pains
become openings or occasions for a new vision….
Hospitality can convert that wound into a source of healing.

- Henri Nouwen

We've learned to fly the air like birds,
we've learned to swim the seas like fish,
and yet we haven't learned to walk the earth
as brothers and sisters.

- Martin Luther King, Jr.

The biblical faith is not merely something that speaks alive to our situations but also asks us to be active participants in God's vision and mission of restoring and reshaping the present order of the world by rediscovering ourselves as His fellow partners. Biblical hope is not simply sitting idle and looking forward to what God would do in the days to come but it is something that keeps us actively collaborating with God in bringing the newness in our world. In other words, the hope for the future is actively expressed in what we do at present.

Everyone looks forward to the good times. Everyone is happy to hear when one announces the good news of the end of an evil thing and the advent of some new thing. Anyone can encourage with the words like, "We shall overcome, someday." However, the biblical faith and biblical hope is something that does not simply deny the present for the sake of futuristic views. It is not simply looking for immortality and blissfulness without embracing the present brokenness and mortality. It calls the people to undertake the responsibility of healing others. Therefore, the question is not about the time when we will be healed but rather it is how we can mobilize our wounds to heal those in pain and brokenness. It is embracing our weaknesses to become a channel of the blessing of others.

One of the outstanding characteristics of God in times of suffering and pain is not simply that He promises a time of healing and restoration but also calls the people to embrace their pains and become a resource of healing in someone else's brokenness. Even if the broken one is our enemy, we are called to heal him/her too. To put it in one word, we are called to be *wounded healers*, *lamenting comforters, broken restorers* and *suffering peacemakers*. We are not called to escape our realities of pain and sorrow, merely waiting for the Lord to restore us completely, rather we are called to be involved in the fragility and mortality of our being and become active agents of God in healing and restoring others.

Let me bring up one example from the life of Apostle Paul. While much can be said about him, I wish to point out one specific incident to understand how he responded to crisis when everyone around him was engulfed with the fear of death. In Acts 27, Paul along with other prisoners began to sail to the city of Rome. Although the official government of the Jewish nation could not charge Paul guilty of anything, it was decided, as per Paul's own request, to transfer his case to the Roman emperor. The journey began peacefully and everything seemed to go well with their voyage.

When the ship reached a harbour in a certain place, Paul advised the captain not to resume the journey as it was not the right time. However, disregarding Paul's suggestion, the journey resumed. But after a few days, the ship was struck by a wild storm. It was a tempestuous tide and everything in the ship was thrown into the sea to lessen the weight of the ship. However, nothing seemed to work out. Everyone on board was gripped with fear. They all lost hope that they could be saved at all. All that they could see was the wild storm and chaotic darkness. It is said that they could witness neither the sun nor the stars for several days.

They had no food for a long time because they have lost all the things that they have brought. Then we see Paul, a fellow prisoner and the one sharing in the tempest, stood up amidst all of the fellow-travellers and sailors. Instead of expressing hatred and indifference for rejecting his advice, he embraced the situation, spoke words of encouragement and shared his food with those around him. His response to the crisis did not only bring encouragement but also gave hope that they would reach their destination. Offering a word of encouragement and satisfying the hunger of the fellow passengers, made Paul a wounded-healer. He who was himself going through times of brokenness and pain became a channel of hope for many others who lost all their hope. Paul was not on a journey to make a trip to Rome but was travelling as an innocent prisoner. Yet, he mobilized all of his turbulent conditions to let the life of God flow through his fragile, mortal and wounded body.

4.1 Seeking welfare in the Exile

As seen in the previous chapter, the Babylonian exile was one of the most unforgettable horrors of the people of God. It was a time when they were all disoriented and dislocated. All of their hopes were shattered and their faith was at stake. It would probably be easy for anyone to come in the guise of a prophet and spread their own messages as it happened in the past. When a certain prophet

announced in the name of the God of Israel that the exile would soon end and that the people would be released from the yoke of Babylon within two years, it was likely for everyone to see it as a direct message from God because that would be news beyond their expectations. This message might prepare them to look forward to God to destroy their enemies and deliver His people from crisis and public dishonour.

Amidst this, comes another message, that too in the name of the Lord Yahweh, announcing that the exile would not end in two years as expected by many. It would last for seventy years, more than half a century. People are advised not to rely on falsified anticipations. Instead, they are called to embrace the realities, mobilize their brokenness in the cities of their enemies, and work out for the welfare of the nation in which they are captivated. Although they would be delivered, it would take much longer than expected.

Well, that certainly sounds harsh and it appears that the earlier message came to encourage the people while the latter came to heap anguish and anxiety on the people. It was easy to judge and say that the former is the Word from God for it seeks the welfare of His people while the latter is not. But actually, the scene is reversed. The latter is the message from God while the former is a false prophetic utterance.

All these are found in chapter 29 of Jeremiah. God has always used unparalleled methods of confronting His people. Of course, comfort is needed for the people. All of them were waiting for God to announce the time when the suffering would end. God did it. He encouraged the people that their exile is not permanent and that they shall be brought to their homeland giving them a hope of renewed partnership with God, and hope for the restoration and reorientation of the land that became wild and waste. There are promises of healing the nation from its psycho-social wounds. But there is something unique with our God. Rather than simply

making promises of healing and restoration, He assigns people with responsibility in times of crisis, pain and brokenness. The responsibility is to seek the welfare of the nation in which they are captives.

We can imagine the pain of the ones who are forcefully driven out of their homeland and captivated to live in the places allotted by the conqueror. It is a time of dislocation, unsettlement, uprooting and disorientation from their peaceful lives. It takes a lot of time to adjust to the realities. Perhaps the remembrance of their past life haunts them every single day. Perhaps they feel too shameful to live among their enemies. But it was in such times, they are told to become channels of blessing and healing. Even though they disagree with the supremacy of their enemies over their God, they work out in all ways to keep the stability of the nation. They non-violently resist the ideology that harms social justice and encourages intolerance towards others. Yet they do not present themselves as harmful rather seeking the wellbeing of their enemies too.

We can see a couple of examples. Joseph, from the Old Testament and Jesus, in the New Testament. Joseph was a slave sold to Egypt. It was not his homeland and it was not the place he hoped to dwell in. He had to endure suffering and painful situations. He had to go through times of shame and brokenness. We all know that he remained faithful to God at all times. But what we often miss to see in his life is the character of seeking the welfare of the nation in which he was forced to live. He took the responsibility of supporting the nation in times of famine. He could have escaped from the crisis because it was not his place. But he did not respond indifferently but with utmost care and concern for the whole people. He was not simply looking for the time to be released from all his bondages rather mobilized all of his wounds to bring out his character of seeking to do good wherever he was. In other words, he transformed his wounds into the healing of many.

Likewise, we see Jesus of Nazareth, the Messiah. All of his life Jesus was an itinerant teacher who did not have a permanent place to dwell, he sought the welfare of humankind. He utilized all of his opportunities to serve the lowliest forms of life. He embraced the pain and suffering to bring healing to many. Although he was insecure, he became a refuge for many who trusted and followed him. Although he was vulnerable to the attacks of the official religious authorities because he prophetically criticized the way society was moving, he accepted all those rejected by society. At the cross, Jesus embraced his bruise and pain so that by His wounds we can be healed.

In this pandemic, do we simply wait upon the Lord to transform things? Of course, we pray and intercede every day, we pray for the recovery and restoration of our nation back to its state of health and wellbeing. But that is not everything we are supposed to do. As we move on with the hope that God will bring an end to this national havoc, we are not called to escape the realities by hurrying to come out of the suffering. Instead, we are called to reorient ourselves according to the realities and work our best to contribute to the welfare of the nation. Prayer is the solution for the current helplessness but it is not the only way to respond to crises. Along with prayer, we can do something more to collaborate with the Lord in turning out the worst times into opportunities to serve humankind.

4.2 Learning from Early Church

We can also learn from the ways how the early Church responded to the calamities and other such crises that disturbed the normalcy of life in the community. One of the incidents we can focus on is the time of severe famine that took place in the reign of Roman Emperor Claudius. According to Acts 11:27-28, there was a prophet named Agabus who came from Jerusalem to Antioch and predicted that there would be a severe famine all over the world

(meaning the Roman world). When it came to pass, the early church was not into speculating the reasons behind this calamity. Perhaps the famine would have been so serious and severe. Yet we do not find the believers in the early church engaged in debates and discussions to find out the spiritual reason for which the famine was caused. Was it God's curse? Or was it a sign of the end times? No. They were not into such speculations. They decided to contribute some relief fund to the believers in Judaea.

Being spiritually exemplary, the early church could have prayed and fasted before the Lord to know the reason for the severity of the famine. Perhaps they could simply pray to the Lord to forgive the people and take away the famine. They could have done it but they didn't. What they did was quite opposite to our immediate responses to the pandemic. Instead of making worthless discussions, they thought of a better approach to handle the crisis. They might have prayed but they did not stop with that. They actively engaged in turning their times of crises as opportunities not to convert the people but to serve humankind and express the love of Christ in and through them.

Another similar-minded church that we find in the New Testament is the church in the Macedonian province. They were not so rich. They were also going through economic hardships. Yet they did not hesitate to help the poor believers in Jerusalem in their time of need. They could have prayed to God to provide all the needs of the believers in Jerusalem. But they did something more than that. They collaborated with God by stretching their generous hands to serve their fellow brothers and sisters in crisis. They acted out of compassion and grace.

All these things are just glimpses of the way how the early church responded to several critical situations. It was Christians in the Roman Empire who used the available medical facilities to serve the people in the times of pandemics and other contagious diseases. While in the Greco-Roman world, the sick and weak were not given

the social dignity and proper identity, it was Christians who served them in their diseases, using all the available means to heal the sick (more than praying). By doing so, they not only healed physical ailments but also give them a psycho-social identity. In times of wars, famines and epidemics, people were afraid of contacting the sick ones with the fear of getting affected by the diseases. But it was Christians, as doctors and medical staff in the present times, who took an extra mile to assist and treat the diseased ones.

Even in this pandemic, we can do something more than pray and intercede. We can collaborate with God in creating a new life. We can become active participants in God's vision and mission of restoring the world. Remember, God is not simply concerned about deporting souls from earth to heaven instead God is concerned with the holistic wellbeing of humankind. God cares for the earthly issues as much as he cares for the heavenly matters.

4.3 Examples from the History

Much can be learned from the responses of the Christian missionaries and ministers down through the centuries. Because of their timely and active responses to social issues and diseases, we are enjoying the legacy of many of their efforts. I would not say all of the progression in the world is because of Christians nor would I negate those dark spots within Christianity but I simply bring up some ideas to learn from the past leaders. I would simplify and summarize the core values and responses of Christian missionaries in the past.

a. During the times of crises, they did not evaluate the suffering to speculate the spiritual reasons for which the suffering has caused. That is, they were not obsessed to know the spiritual causes of crises.
b. In times of crises, they understood that selfless service to humankind mattered as much as it does to increase the size of the church.

c. They did not try to escape from the social realities of pain and suffering. Instead, they embraced them.
d. They were intolerant to see the society being degraded and dislocated because of different severe crises.
e. They were not indifferent. They disregarded their selfish pleasure for the sake of serving others.
f. They never limited themselves to the hours of prayer. Along with constant prayer, they thought of the ways they could help society to help things to get better.
g. They used the turbulent times as opportunities, not to lure the people into their religion but to serve the people in their times of needs. They always walked the extra mile.

In this pandemic, let us unlearn being obsessed with the mentality of giving spiritual reasons for the suffering of others. Perhaps those things may lead someone to repentance but that is not the way we ought to respond. By speculating the reasons behind the suffering, we end up like the friends of Job who judged the character of the suffering ones based on their narrow mindedness. By engaging in evaluative and interpretative approaches, we simply fail to take the responsibility of serving humankind. When we fail in it, we miss our goal. We need to feel the pain and brokenness of the ones who are suffering and hopeless. We can always do something more than mere prayers. We can mobilize our strengths and weaknesses, pains and wounds, tears and laments to become healers and rebuilders. Our hospitality shows it. Let us welcome the suffering ones so that we can become their resource of hope and life. God is the real source of life and the source of all hope. But we can become His channels of blessing and healing. We can become the body of Christ in bringing His purposes to fulfilment through our active responsibility and selfless service.

> *But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs*

to God and does not come from us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies. For while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us, but life in you. (2 Cor. 4:7-12)

CHAPTER FIVE

Journeying with the Lamb towards the New Creation

Jesus of Nazareth ushers in not simply a new religious possibility, not simply a new ethic or a new way of salvation, but a new creation.

- N. T Wright

Christian hope does not promise successful days to the rich and strong, but resurrection and life to those who must exist in the shadows of death.

- Jurgen Moltmann

One of the constant responses that we hear concerning the pandemic or any other such disasters is, "all these are the signs of the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. All these things point out that the end of the world is near." This is one understanding, I feel, that keeps most of the Christians (not all) irresponsible in hard times. It is a very handy response that we have all been using for at least two centuries. Most of us might have seen the COVID 19 pandemic as a precedent of the even greater catastrophic events that will take place in the future. However, this is another kind of obsession in popular Christianity. Although several scriptural passages can be cited to prove the argument, most of the time, the original Judeo-Christian faith of the end times gets lost in our newspaper approaches to biblical texts.

First of all, what does the Bible has to say about the end? The Jewish concept of end times was not about the end of the world in terms of annihilation of the universe. It is the end of the present world order which will be replaced by the new order of justice and peace governed by God. That is to say, the present world systems have become corrupted, dehumanized, and act as draconian beasts. The end refers to the point of time when God would bring a climax to this age of evil by recreating the world in a way that would resemble the peaceful existence in the beginning. In other words, the end times are assigned not to destroy the world but to liberate the earth from its destroyers and restore the world to its original state of goodness, order and perfection. Doubtless, early Christianity also carried the same thought.

According to the New Testament, the end of the present age has already begun with the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus the Messiah. The beginning of the new creation is already initiated in Jesus Christ. It is in and through him the world can be restored to its original purpose and people can be transformed into a new humanity. The purpose of Jesus is not to make human beings better but to initiate new humanity through the regeneration of hearts and baptism in the Holy Spirit. By showing allegiance to Jesus, the new world can be formed. However, the process of this new creation will come to its consummation and perfection at the return of Jesus. Therefore, the end times have already begun not in the 21st century but in the first century. The renewal and transformation of the world has already begun.

Why then did Jesus specify famines, earthquakes, diseases, wars and several other catastrophic events as the signs for His return? Why then does most of the Book of Revelation talk about the severest disasters that will take place in the future? When we look at those things, isn't this pandemic a sign for that *end of the world?*

The Jewish and early Christian faith believed that the great times of hardships and sufferings precede the coming of salvation. All the catastrophic things do not prepare the world to be destroyed but just indicate that God will return to reorder and recreate the world. Even when Jesus spoke of the signs of his return, he was not highlighting the ways how the world will end but the ways how the world is going to be ripened for the new creation. This is so with the Book of Revelation. The whole point of the Revelation is not how the world is going to end but about the new creation. It is about how God will bring an end to the present world order of dehumanization and de-creation. While with all their inhumanness the evil ones contribute to the destruction of the world, while God lets – not approves – the evil to do its worst, God returns to reclaim His world back to Himself.

The original Jewish faith is that God would not destroy what He has created for good. Therefore, when evil plays its worst role in destroying the world, God returns to destroy the destroyers of the earth (Rev. 11:18) and recreate the present world into a new form of existence and a new form of life where everything is peaceful enough for God and human beings to live together. Therefore the climactic vision of the Bible is not the end of the world but the recreation and of the world to begin a new life. The coming of the Kingdom of God is not a horrible thing but it is the happiest moment because it marks an end to the *signs* that are caused as a consequence of human wickedness.

The Revelation attests that the Lord Jesus the Messiah is the beginning and the end. Look at it carefully. It is in and through Him, all things have begun and it is with Him all things find their climax. What does it mean by saying God is the end of all things? If He is the end of all things, it would not be some tragic moment rather it would be a moment of joy, justice, peace and stability. If He is the end of all things, He will make everything ordered and perfect as it was in the beginning. While the world is enrouting to its doom,

if God is the end of all things, the world would end up being the new creation.

Now let us understand, how all the calamities and pandemics are the *signs to the end*? They are signs to the end because they are disturbing the peaceful existence of the world and calling God for the immediate response to the evil in the world. All of them are preparing the world not to be destroyed but to make it new and transformed. Therefore, the *signs of the end* are not supposed to be used as a means to panic the people. The biblical faith and biblical hope are not waiting for the earth to be destroyed but to be transformed. There is no need to frighten the people by saying that more disasters are yet to follow.

The Church is not called to escape from the realities of the world. We are not called to be deported into a better place while the world is destroyed. That is entirely the opposite of basic biblical faith. I have elaborately discussed these things in my previous book, *Unmuting the Bible*.

What then are we supposed to do that the end times have already begun and God will return to transform the world into a new creation? As Christians, we are not called to be numb and idly become spectators of how God is going to transform the situations. We, who have the foretaste of the new creation, should collaborate with God in recreating the world. Although it would not be possible on our own efforts, we should not contribute to the decreation of the world that is what God hates. Amid the pandemics and disasters, we are to act as God's agents of filling the earth with heavenly life so that a new world can be created around us through the power of the Holy Spirit. In other words, we are supposed to become the Body of Christ and do those things that Jesus will do in hard times.

Let us, therefore, embrace our pains, accept the reality of brokenness and work out for welfare with teary eyes. Let us walk with the Slain Lamb to the New Creation and become His witness. Let us weep with those who weep as Jesus wept. Let us learn to see

God who takes the lowliest forms of life to create new things. As we struggle with this pandemic, let us become active agents of God's mission of creating a new world. May God fill us with His Spirit to be propelled to envisage the new world with weeping eyes!

> *Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,*
> *"See, the home of God is among mortals.*
> *He will dwell with them;*
> *they will be his peoples,*
> *and God himself will be with them;*
> *he will wipe every tear from their eyes.*
> *Death will be no more;*
> *mourning and crying and pain will be no more,*
> *for the first things have passed away." (Revelation 21:1-4)*

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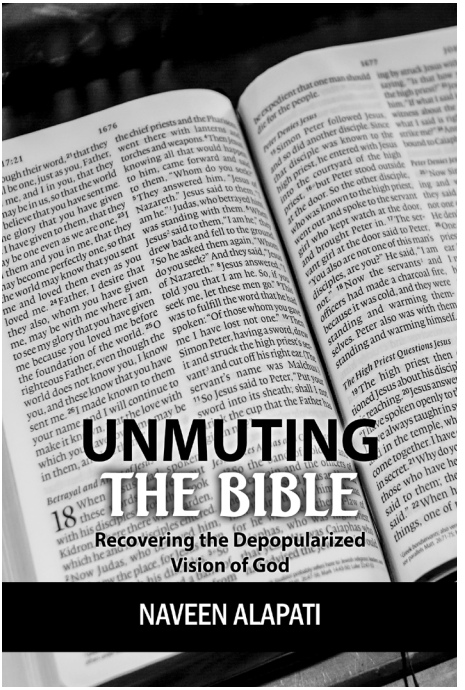
UNMUTING THE BIBLE
Recovering the Depopularized Vision of God



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